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INTERNATIONAL COMITY AND THE JAPANESE WOMAN

BY JOHN COLE MCKIM, M.A.

I

INTERNATIONAL friction may arise from a conflict of interests, but international comity can be based only upon a high degree of mutual understanding and sympathy. This goes far to explain the difficulties which lie in the path of those who would see the mutual regard of the American and the Japanese people informed by a spirit of enduring friendship. There is no lack, on either side, of the will to be friendly. The conflict, whether actual or potential, of the just interests of Japan and America is comparatively slight. Yet the Japanese bogey in America and (to an even greater degree) the American bogey in Japan is used with some measure of effectiveness by the jingo publicist and politician.

The alarms thus unworthily aroused, though informing but a small section of responsible thought, must contain, so long as they survive, a menace to international understanding; and they have not been allayed by the frankest possible explanations, by the most lucid protestations of friendly intent, nor by clearly substantiated assertions of the absence of any marked conflict of legitimate interests. They cannot be so allayed because they derive their main strength from something more subtle and dangerous than an obvious and therefore adjustable conflict of interest.

For if one comes to think of a people as being so altogether peculiar in its natural affections as would render it something more or less than human—as composed of beings into whose motives one cannot possibly enter, the springs of whose action one cannot possibly understand—a state of mind is produced that is absolutely preventive of sympathetic intercourse. It is not that such intercourse is interrupted by

a temporary conflict of interests, but that it is made permanently impossible by a fundamental misunderstanding.

That some such feeling with regard to the Japanese people is widely entertained in English-speaking countries is scarcely to be denied. For this circumstance a large amount of ill-informed writing (often the work of travellers whose brief experience has been confined to places which cater especially to the great tourist trade) is largely responsible. The vast majority of these books and articles are written either in a tone of adulation so fulsome as to be what is probably the sole ground of the charge that the writers are subsidized by Japanese, or else in a spirit of condemnation so unmitigated as to make a sensitive people suspect the presence of ulterior motives.

Of the two sorts of writing the first, naturally, is the less irritating to the Japanese, but neither is calculated to convey the impression that the Japanese are an entirely human people whose differences to others, however striking, are to be accounted for quite reasonably by geographical, climatic, historical, economic, and religious circumstances.

II

Of peculiar interest to the flying tourist are Japanese family life and cognate subjects. It is very curious that the particular side of life concerning which people of all nations are the most reticent should be thought of as peculiarly a fit subject for the pen of the casual globe-trotter; and it is not surprising that most of what has been written on this point should as much mislead the American reader by its inaccuracy as it is calculated to annoy the Japanese by its injustice.

The quotations of which I make use are from an article which appeared in a popular American magazine, which I happen to have before me as I write, with the rather unusual title, *Japan: A Land Unawakened*. But it is not to be supposed that this excellent periodical is an exceptional or intentional offender. This particular article is one of a large number of similar productions, but it is convenient to use it as a reference not only because it lies ready to my hand but also because it is highly typical of them all. This is not by any means the first time that the Japanese woman has been presented to the American reader as an object of commisera-

tion nor the Japanese man as correspondingly deserving of execration.

But there is very little truth behind these representations. They are frequently based upon the superficial observations of transient tourists who are temperamentally disposed to find the customs of a foreign country irksome. In some cases the experience which informs the pens of these ready writers scarcely extends beyond the failure to secure a seat in a crowded Tokio tram. It is indeed quite true that Japanese etiquette does not require a man to surrender his seat to a woman, but neither, as some writers seem to wish us to suppose, is a woman expected to surrender her seat to a man. And, though most sensible persons will conform, as, I think, Japanese travellers in America do conform, to the harmless customs of the country in which they find themselves, neither will any sensible person care to argue that there exists an abstract principle on which one able-bodied person should surrender his seat to another. One thing is certain: an aged or infirm person of either sex may confidently expect to secure a seat in the average Japanese street-car, however crowded.¹ Sometimes, even, the instinctive courtesy of the Japanese who has traveled abroad or who has read of foreign ways will prompt him to offer his seat to an American woman simply because he thinks she might perhaps expect it in her own country,—an extraordinary courtesy, quite uncalled for by Japanese etiquette, and one which I have seen accepted without any sign of acknowledgment.

Again, a Japanese man will bow, removing his hat if he have one, upon meeting a woman of his acquaintance. That he extends exactly the same courtesy to his male friends ought not, surely, to invite censure. In cases where custom must regulate precedence, as in going along a narrow road or in entering or leaving the room, it is ordinarily the man (as with us the woman) who goes first. This rule, like ours, is subject to some modification, but neither seems, on abstract grounds, preferable to the other, nor does either bear any more relation than does the other to the question of "equal rights."

Or, again (when we remember that a Japanese house contains no chairs, that a Japanese ordinarily sits on knees

¹Just as this goes to the post a friend has told me of several incidents inconsistent with this statement. These incidents, though well vouched for, are, I think, exceptional. And, so far as they occur they certainly constitute an innovation upon the *native* etiquette of Old Japan.

and heels, and that a bow made in that position is the merest of indoor courtesies) why should it be held up for execration that "when the husband enters the house, the wife, kneeling, places three fingers of her hands¹ upon the floor and bows low"? Such a bow as is here described is about equivalent to a nod from within an easy chair. She would make a much lower bow to an ordinary guest, and it would be far more irksome to her to be obliged to stand up or to bow in any other position than "kneeling." As a matter of fact, husband and wife are expected to use language with each other which would be deemed disrespectful if used with anyone else of corresponding social rank, because Japanese etiquette ordinarily requires the use of derogatory language concerning anything that pertains to one's self.

What is there to be said, then, for the foreigner who complains not that she is treated with lack of courtesy but that others are given equal consideration; or what of the Christian emissary who lays claim to higher dignity than appertains to the common humanity which has been raised above the angels?

But we may pass somewhat lightly over this question of etiquette because, in most countries, it is regulated by old custom and is observed mainly because *some* system is necessary and the one in local use is customary. If it be held that etiquette bears any very important relationship to morality there is, perhaps, something to be said for the system that lays the least emphasis on sex. And in leaving this aspect of the subject it may be submitted that bows are certainly not servile when they are exchanged. It may be added that in the matter of formal etiquette we have nothing to teach the Japanese about courtesy to anyone. Surely we should not grudge this meed of credit to a people that, for the last sixty years, has, with combined good sense and modesty, learned so many things of us.

III

On what, then, are based these so facile complaints not of the Japanese woman but of the foreign tourist? The article before me makes some very ludicrous statements about the legal status of the Japanese woman. As a matter of fact

¹ The significance of this is of course lost upon a writer who appears to have spent about two months in Japan. To greet an ordinary guest, not three fingers only but the whole of both palms must be flat on the floor and the forehead must be brought down to the backs of the hands.

the Japanese woman has a legal status which compares surprisingly well with that of her brother. It is true that she cannot vote, but neither, in nine cases out of ten, can he. Let me examine in detail some of the truly remarkable allegations in the article which I am taking as a type.

"The typical high-school for girls," we are told, "limits the education to sewing and etiquette." My knowledge of this point should be exceptionally exact as, among my other duties, I have the oversight of a small high-school girls' hostel and examine the school reports of the inmates. The subjects on which high-school girls in this inland town of less than 50,000 inhabitants are marked include mathematics, geography, English, history, ethics, "domestic science," needlework, Japanese (corresponding to our "English" courses), music, drawing, etiquette and physical culture. This is an ordinary Government high-school. Domestic science and needlework appear to take the place given in boys' schools to physics and chemistry. This does not seem an unreasonable amount of vocational study for those who expect to spend their lives as wives and mothers. Nor does the inclusion of etiquette appear to be an evil.

Again, we are asked to believe that: "Woman's degradation has spread immorality in Japan. In every large city there is a segregated district. Young girls are sold by their parents¹ for a three or five year period of bondage. . . . A girl cannot get away. A wall surrounds the district, and a soldier stands at the gate. Once inside there is no escape."

The only item of truth in this extraordinary statement is that Japan, like some western nations, tries to enforce the segregation of vice. The sale of a girl for such a purpose would have no standing in law, and in all of my district with its more than a million inhabitants I have never heard of a single instance which remotely resembled such a transaction.

The law does provide facilities for the escape of girls who wish to reform,—facilities of which benevolent societies take constant advantage. A girl who does *not* wish to reform may not, legally, ply her trade elsewhere than in the segregated district. Whatever advantages are held to arise from the system of reglementation are, of course, lost wherever this rule is not enforced.

There are, in the district where I live, at least four towns

¹ An unwary use of the plural by one who, to be consistent, should maintain that the mother had no voice in the transaction.

with segregated districts. In three of these places there is no wall or fence of any sort. This is remarkable in a country where walls and fences are very much the fashion,—where the humblest householder likes to have a six-foot fence about his little plot. In two of these towns the district is so situated that I have had, once or twice, to pass through it upon my ordinary occasions. In one place I did not guess that I was in the “quarter” until I had passed nearly through it and then deduced it only from the fact that what looked like a street of small hotels seemed singularly quiet at two in the afternoon. I venture to think that a person newly arrived from America might walk through that quarter at any daylight hour without suspecting its nature.

The “soldier at the gate” is, need I say, a myth. In garrison towns a military policeman may, sometimes, be seen. But his concern is for the inmates not of the “quarter” but of the local barracks.¹ In short, the circumstances which combine to make escape difficult are not created by law, but are such as operate to the same end elsewhere. Of course girls are sometimes lured away by the offer of factory work. Even here there is, strictly speaking, no “sale.” But a certain percentage of wages is advanced which must be worked off. If these girls are, as is sometimes alleged, ever forced into the “quarter,” I am convinced that the parents are, in practically all cases, genuinely deceived.

In the matter of marriage, custom, which is to some extent supported by law, gives certain not especially unreasonable powers to the head of the house. But this is not a discrimination made with a view to sex. It proceeds from the great value which is attached to the integrity of the family

¹ The following figures are given as showing the incidence of venereal disease per annum, per thousand men, in the armies of the countries named:

A. D. 1906 GERMANY	19.8	A. D. 1906 RUSSIA	62.7
1906 FRANCE	28.6	1907 GR. BRITAIN	68.4
1907 JAPAN	37.6	1907 U. S.	167.8

Thus whatever may be said of segregation on general principles it appears to be useful to those who are responsible for the health of soldiers. In the Japanese army a soldier who is known to have visited a clandestine brothel is liable to severe punishment. These figures, taken by themselves, might be thought to point to a difference as between the long-term voluntarily enlisted soldiers of England and America as compared with short-term conscripts of other countries. But other figures, tending to show that venereal disease is more common among civilians than among soldiers, militate against this conclusion. The figures are also, so far as they go, distinctly unfavorable to some of the advocates of teetotalism in the Army canteen. With a “dry” canteen, venereal disease in the United States Army appears to have increased from 167.8 in 1907 to 196.99 in 1909. These are the latest figures per thousand per annum to which I now have access.

and to the perpetuation of the family name. This becomes quite clear when it is understood that the head of the house may be a woman. This often occurs in the case of women who have no brothers. In such cases the husband (usually a younger brother in his own family) takes the family name of the wife, which is, in this way, perpetuated. That this is no twentieth century concession to imported prejudices may be inferred from the fact that one of the earliest scientific censuses (that of A.D. 1872) found 176,721 of these female heads of houses. The number of persons in these houses was over one million.

So far as divorce is concerned, both sexes are allowed very great freedom, divorce by mutual consent being perfectly legal.

It is also stated in the article before me that "the women of Japan have no rights,—no property rights, no rights over even their own children." This is quite erroneous. The statement has no basis in fact either as regards law or custom. So long as a married couple lives in wedlock things go along, *mutatis mutandis*, very much as they do in any country. Where there is any difference of which the law can take cognizance there is a certain presumption (as in most countries) on the side of the head of the house. But this presumption can be overthrown by evidence, and in Japan, where the head of the house need not be of the male sex, it cannot be cited as an instance of sex legislation.¹

¹ The reader is referred to the *Civil Code of Japan*.

The law (Civ. Code Art. 798) recognizes and enforces prenuptial contracts. They must be genuinely prenuptial, i.e., made before the registration of the marriage (Art. 796) and neither party may jeopardize the interests of his or her legal heirs (Art. 794).

In cases where there is no prenuptial contract, the law provides that the head of the house is responsible for "all expenses arising from the marriage," i.e., for the support, etc., of his or her spouse and children. (Art. 798). According to Art. 799, the head of the house is entitled to "use and acquire profit from the property of his or her spouse in accordance with its use"; and he (or she) is correspondingly obliged to "pay out of the fruits of the property of his or her spouse the interest on the obligations which the latter bears." Art. 808 provides that "In case the husband manages the wife's property, a court may, upon demand of the wife, order the husband to furnish proper security with regard to the management and restitution of the property, should such a course be deemed necessary." And, finally, Art. 807 stipulates that "Property owned by a wife or a husband (not being head of the house) since previous to the marriage and property acquired in his or her own name while married, form his or her separate property."

With regard to the custody of the children, this may be provided for (when the divorce is had by mutual consent) by written agreement. When there is no such agreement the presumption at law favors the head of the house whatever his or her sex. This applies equally to judicial divorces with the additional proviso (Art. 819) that "the court may, in the interests of the children, make different dispositions with regard to their custody."

On the whole, it may be said that the Japanese woman shares the legal privileges and disabilities of the Japanese man, and that where exceptions are made the law of compensation has not been wholly unobserved.

IV

So far, we have considered only one aspect of equality—that which relates to the exercise of privilege. It is, as a rule, the only aspect of the question with which the feminist tourist cares to deal. But the Japanese woman is no idle recipient of privilege. She not only claims—it is not so much that she claims, but that she expects—to bear and does bear her fair share of the nation's burdens. I do not refer to a very small section of the leisured class,—that favored class from which most of the few complainants are drawn,—but to the more genuinely human women of the rank and file.

The article to which I have been referring contains the extraordinary statement that: “In a prolonged war against a *civilized*¹ country she” (i. e., Japan) “could not survive.”² At home she would crack, crumble and collapse. Her women could not take the place of men.” The inference is, of course, that, in the writer's opinion, they could not take the place of men as extensively as could the women of those countries which she regards as “civilized.” This is laughable.

There is practically no form of manual labor at which Japanese women cannot do from three-quarters to four-fifths of a man's day's work, and this is the rate at which unskilled labor is hired in this town to-day. That is, the man receives about forty to forty-five cents a day and the woman from thirty to thirty-six cents.

In the event of war, the Japanese woman could take man's place at almost anything from coaling a battleship to filling eighty per cent of the positions in the postal service.

So far as my observation extends, the high infant mortality of Japan is due to post-natal rather than to prenatal conditions. The average Japanese child is necessarily born into poverty. Japanese houses are flimsily built, damp, badly ventilated and, in northern districts, intensely cold in winter. This seems inevitable in a thickly peopled country where any widespread attempt at building or heating in

¹ Italics the author's.

² She might succumb through lack of numbers or, still more likely, through lack of money, but scarcely through lack of courage and effort on the part either of her women or of her men.

American style would soon result in deforestation and the exhaustion of fuel supply.

The same conditions affect the diet of the people. Where there is little or no acreage to spare for pasture, the diet of the people must be largely vegetarian and the milk supply will always be limited. I must pay, for instance, for meat and milk about the same actual prices that I paid in America. What this signifies as to the *relative* cost of these commodities may be inferred from the figures given above. In my school-girls' hostel the cost of food per girl has risen from \$2.50 per month in 1915 to about \$4.00 at the present time. The board of a trained nurse in the local hospital costs, at present, about \$4.50 a month. On the other hand, a missionary, living in very reduced American style, must spend about \$25.00 a month for food. He could scarcely maintain his health on less.

It is hard facts such as these that tourists are likely to overlook when, after a month or so in the country, they essay to cut our Gordian knots.

This very fact,—the participation of women in all forms of manual labor,—is sometimes made the ground of adverse criticism. It is not quite fair for the adverse critic of the Japanese people to try to "have it both ways." It is not fair to criticize the Japanese woman for her alleged inability to do man's work in time of war and then to complain because she does do the same work in time of peace. But since both criticisms have been made, I shall try to say something in answer to that which is based upon fact as well as to deny that which is a pure fiction.

My own observation leads me to think that manual labor as performed by Japanese women (if we except the quite modern factory system where the labor of both men and women is shamefully exploited)¹ is generally healthful; that the health of Japanese farmer girls is likely to deteriorate when they turn from farming to more sedentary work; that their children are among the healthiest in the land; that confining work, such as typing or sewing for long hours, is far more likely to injure the health of prospective mothers than

¹ This is partly to be accounted for by the fact that the modern factory system is a relatively new thing in Japan. Hence legislation has not been devised to alleviate the effects of unregulated competition. The question is being strongly agitated in Japan. The conditions in some mines also leave something to be desired. But in neither case can it be said that there is any discrimination based upon sex.

is the healthy outdoor life to which Japanese farm women are inured from childhood.

This healthful condition is due in part to circumstances which, possibly, do not come within the knowledge of the transient critic.

No Japanese laborer is expected to work "against time." Often two people appear to be doing what we should consider the work of one. This is doubtless a good thing in a country where work must be distributed among a very dense population. So, when father, mother, brother and sister are all seen together in the paddy-field, this is not to be taken as meaning that they are doing four days' work in one.

Then, too, it is doubtless difficult for a tourist, who has been "raised soft," to estimate the effects of an entirely different training. She is too likely to think along such lines as: "How should I feel were I carrying that sack or spading that plot?"

Finally, it is to be borne in mind that the Japanese rural population consists, for the most part, of gentle, kindly people, much more likely to be the victims of malingerers than to impose over-heavy burdens upon each other. The hardships that undoubtedly do exist are not inflicted by one sex upon the other. They arise in the main from natural and, apparently, irremediable circumstances. It is for this reason, and not because of "oriental servility", that they are borne so cheerfully and without mutual recrimination.

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